LSA/LSO

Internal Discussion Bulletin 1970

Contents

THE SOCIALIST STRATEGY FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION

NUQ.ber 3
1uly 1970

Price 35 cents

THE SOCIALIST STRATEGY FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION

--submitted by the Political Committee of the LSA/LSO

Two years ago we laid the groundwork for our intervention in the women's liberation movement with the preparation of our brief to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada and our presentation of it to open hearings of the commission at key centers across the country. In our brief we set ourselves the task of making a basic Marxist analysis of the position of women in Canadian society, and putting forward a series of transitional demands that would give direction and perspective to the struggle for women's liberation.

In our work around the commission hearings, we saw the deep discontent that existed among almost all layers of Canadian women, and felt the first rumblings of an emerging struggle. At our convention in July 1968, we took note of these facts and geared ourselves to continuing our work in this area, taking advantage of every developing opportunity. In the intervening period, we have seen the struggle for women's liberation emerge as an increasingly significant part of the overall radicalization of Canadian society.

In this document, we want to examine some of the main features of this movement, the stage it is now at, and to analyse some of the major issues being discussed in it. It aims to make an assessment of the women's liberation movement and our intervention in it, and to determine the character and direction of our continuing work in this area.

Features of the Women's Liberation Movement

Behind the development of the women's liberation movement lies the fact, which is becoming obvious to increasing numbers, that the possibilities now exist for women to have greater freedom than ever before. At the same time as a drastically shorter period of women's lifespan is being taken up with the traditional function as childbearer and child-rearer, it is becoming all the more apparent that the material means exist to liberate women from all the most onerous aspects of child-rearing and housework. Medical science is now capable of giving women a hitherto unattainable control over their bodies. On an ever-increasing scale women are entering institutions of higher learning and the work force where they are being swept up into the onward going struggles of the student movement and the working class.

Yet these developments only serve to heighten the contradiction between the possibilities that currently exist for the liberation of - women and the reality of their present oppression, by bringing the deep social, economic and psychological oppression of women into sharper focus, enabling them to comprehend the dehumanizing and stultifying effect of their upbringing, and become aware of the narrow and oppressive future that lies before them.

It is no accident that the women's liberation movement in its early stages is developing among students, professional and more materially privileged women, who are the first to sense, and the freest to act against these contradictions. And yet the movement has the potential to reach far beyond these layers to working class women who are struck more directly and more sharply by this oppression. It is working class women who are hardest hit by wage discrimination, which often reduces their incomes to below the officially recognized poverty level, who are the greatest victims of the current abortion laws, who suffer most harshly under the double burden of worker and homemaker.

The women's liberation movement has the potential to reach out to all women, and to draw them into an anti-capitalist struggle and towards the socialist solution. Demands such as that for equal pay launch them into struggle against capitalism on an economic level, others such as the demand for massive government-financed system of child-care, into struggle on a political level and against the capitalist state. The oppression of women is so deeply embedded in the very foundations of the system itself, that no series of reforms, however far reaching, can eradicate it. Thus, the struggle as it moves forward, is propelled all the more clearly against the capitalist system which benefits from and sustains the oppression of women.

such as the demand for massive government-financed system of child-care, into struggle on a political level and against the capitalist state. The oppression of women is so deeply embedded in the very foundations of the system itself, that no series of reforms, however far reaching, can eradicate it. Thus, the struggle as it moves forward, is propelled all the more clearly against the capitalist system which benefits from and sustains the oppression of women.

The women's liberation movement in Canada is still in its very early stages and only a small number of women have so far been mobilized in the independent women's liberation groups, which have emerged as the instruments of this struggle. These groups, which now exist in all the major centres and in many smaller communities across Canada, are still largely in the process of defining themselves, their programs and strategies. By and large, they have been unable to orient themselves to newly radicalizing women. Their small size stands out in sharp contrast to the overall ferment that exists on this issue, reflected not merely in the growing numbers of women who continue to come around the groups, or in the cross-Canada abortion caravan action which drew in a wide range of women, but in the broad discussion of this question developing in the mass media and in women's organizations of every kind, and in its impact on such traditionally conservative organizations as the Canadian Medical Association and the Canadian Psychiatric Association.

This struggle has become an increasingly important part of the overall radicalization of Canadian society and has the potential, right now, to involve very broad layers of women.

Our Intervention

From the start our brief has played the central role in our intervention in the movement. Presenting a basic Marxist introduction to the oppression of women in Canada tied to a series of demands, it remains the programmatic foundation of our work in this area. Its four basic programmatic themes stand today as the basis of our transitional program on the question of women's liberation. The four themes are:

1) Women must have complete control of their bodies. Birth control devices and information freely available. The removal of all restrictions on abortion.

2) Special measures to ensure that women have complete access to education. Abolition of fees, and an income provided to students; universal co-education; special encouragement in analytical fields. Write women back into history. Abolition of all forms of sex discrimination in the schools.

3) Women must be freed from their traditional responsibilities for the child. For a family that is a harmonious relationship between human beings. A far reaching system of government-financed facilities including nursery schools and day care centres must be established. This would permit women to seek employment outside the home. A state wage for those who choose to be homemakers.

4) For complete equality for women at work.

Many of the demands that we raised have been carried forward by the women's liberation movement, and have evoked mass response. In the brief we called for the removal of any and all restrictions on the right of a woman to determine whether or ot to bear a child. Today free abortion on demand has emerged as one of the centra1 mobilizing demands of the movement. It was around this challenge that the movement took a decisive step forward and launched the first cross-country action involving women's liberation groups from different areas and with different philosophies. In addition we put forward the demand that women be written back into history. Today, in many areas the movement is calling for women's studies courses in schools and universities.

In the period since we published the brief, the women's liberation movement itself has carried out a number of interesting studies which have thrown light on various aspects of women's oppression. These include areas such as the dynamics of the family under capitalism, the emotional and psychological oppression of women, and the dehumanized image of woman as a sex object which is an integral part of big business advertising and "culture". The majority of these studies have a fundamental weakness in that they fail to use the Marxist method, and as a result are all too often the basis for utopian, reformist or ultraleft solutions. In this sense, these studies stand in contrast to our brief which presented a series of demands with a genuinely

revolutionary perspective, based on historical materialist analysis. They show both the seriousness and the immaturity of the movement, and above all, sharply pose how the Marxist method is the indispensable tool for analysing women's oppression and for working out a strategy for liberation -

Our overall perspective in the women's liberation movement has been to participate in building a movement which will attract new layers of women, educate them and draw them into struggle around democratic and transitional demands. We have set ourselves the task of working in existing groups to develop programs and activities geared to involving newly radicalizing women, and in several areas where no groups existed we have taken the initiative in setting them up. We participate in the day to day struggles of this movement for reforms to alleviate some of the most inhuman aspects of women's oppression. We seek to show women that their oppression is rooted in capitalism, and win them to an understanding of what is necessary to destroy this system and win their liberation. We want to fuse this struggle with other anti-capitalist struggles and carry them forward to the socialist solution.

Issues in the Movement

As the movement continues to grow a number of issues are heatedly debated. It is useful to pinpoint six of these and discuss them in some detail.

1) Should women form their own independent groups
2) How will this movement be built
3) How should the movement relate to other issues and struggles
4) Is the task to reform people (especially men) or to destroy the capitalist system
5) Are all women or only working class women oppressed
6) The debate around the family

1. Should women form their own independent Organizations?

This issue has been sharply posed by the Maoist Canadian Party of Labour and their co-thinkers in the Worker-Student Alliance, who hold that independent women's organizations promote divisions within the working class, and who have – when they had the possibility – tried to destroy the independent character of these groups by packing them with men and imposing their line.

We hold that the development of independent women's organizations has proven to be a necessary and highly progressive step. It has provided the vehicle for women to break free from their traditional subordination. It has proven attractive to women who have had no previous political experience and who shy away from male-dominated organizations.

Within these groups women are learning to become leaders, theoreticians, organizers; they are developing the abilities, learning the skills and gaining the experiences that society has deprived them of. Within these organizations women are achieving a dignity and confidence as individual human beings. These groups are, in fact, a training ground for the revolutionary struggles that lie ahead. Far from fostering divisions within the class, this process brings far more women into struggle against the system than would otherwise be possible.

2) How will the Movement be built?

Sectarianism and elitism have hampered the development of the women's liberation movement thus far. The newly born organized movement is still dominated by women who come out of the political tendencies, mainly the New Left, who have shown themselves incapable of developing a sensitive orientation to newly radicalizing women and thereby of mobilizing the widespread ferment that exists about women's oppression. Their organizational norms exclude new women from joining the groups. They are elitist, believing that a particular small group of women has all the answers or can find them either through intense personal discussions ("consciousness raising")

or individual study. They are afraid that all women who want to fight for their liberation are encouraged to join it might "water down" the group, making it "liberal." Internally, they exclude all but the inner circle from decision- making by means of the consensus method and are extremely hostile to democratic decision-making.

These problems which stifle the movement were sharply posed during the abortion caravan campaign. The campaign showed both the tremendous possibilities before the movement and the problems that most of the existing groups have in orienting to developing these possibilities into a mass movement. Our role in the abortion caravan was to constantly pose this perspective and to oppose proposals that stood in its way. In spite of our influence the action was plagued with elements of cliquism, exclusionism and ultraleftism.

We have pushed the perspective of a mass action oriented movement in the existing women's liberation groups. We have emphasized the need to involve all women who want to be part of the struggle, regardless of their philosophies, politics, experiences, class backgrounds, etc. We have said the organizational norms of the movement must be geared to this end.

In Toronto the two groups that were available for women to join as they become aware of their oppression, the New Feminists and the Women's Liberation Movement were narrow and cliquish, without any present viability.

After a year of fighting a dead-end battle in these two groups for a mass orientation, we have taken the initiative along with a number of independent women in launching the Toronto Women's Caucus on this basis.

In other areas across the country the same necessity for an outward-oriented action organization exists, and the debate around this question is still continuing. In Vancouver we have formed a tendency within the Vancouver Women's Caucus on this basis. In Hamilton, after months of battling Maoists who had stacked the meetings with men and taken over, the group we are now rebuilding the Hamilton and District Women's Liberation Movement with our perspective.

We participate in building effective groups on a non-exclusionist, action-oriented basis. We advocate actions that will pull the movement out of the narrow framework of its present membership. Wherever possible we try to build coalitions between all women's liberation groups on general projects and on specific issues.

3) How should the Women's Liberation Movement relate to other issues and struggles?

A whole spectrum of views exist on this question, ranging from the position that the women's liberation movement should take stands on a whole series of different issues not directly related to women's liberation, to the position that women's liberation is not related to any other social or political issues.

We reject the concept that the women's liberation groups now developing should adopt a rounded "anti-imperialist", "revolutionary", "socialist" or "Marxist" program – a concept which serves only to limit the group to already convinced radicals, often to limit them to one particular tendency. At the same time we oppose the concept that the women's liberation movement should become a single issue movement around one particular aspect of women's oppression, such as abortion.

Because the oppression of women touches on every aspect of life this struggle quickly relates and overlaps with other struggles. We see the criteria that should be used in determining whether the movement should take a stand on an issue that is not primarily a women's issue as being whether or not that particular struggle broadens the movement and enables it to move forward in an anti-capitalist direction. We see the best possible way to unite other issues with women's liberation is through action. We want to win them to the understanding that their struggle is an important component in the overall fight against exploitation and oppression.

For example, we try to win women liberationists to the anti-Vietnam war movement by pointing out how the war-bred inflation cutting into the family budget makes this movement attractive to women; how the imperialist system which wages war against the Vietnamese also sustains the oppression of women; and how their Vietnamese sisters are at the forefront of the world-wide struggle for women's liberation. We search for means whereby women can demonstrate their solidarity with other struggles in action; for example by building women's contingents in anti-war demonstrations or by participating with their own banners in actions around the national struggle in Quebec.

4) Is the Task to reform People (males in particular) or to destroy Capitalism?

One position we encounter, which has as yet not been formulated in a worked out way, holds that the oppression of women is rooted in the psychology of men and women, in their interpersonal relationships, rather than in the economic and social structure of society. It follows from this that the primary task of the movement should be to reach out to men and women on an individual basis, transforming their ways of seeing and relating to one another, and gradually thereby eliminating the oppression of women. In this view male chauvinism, seen as a phenomenon with no social roots, is the primary target.

Although we recognize that the struggle against all diverse manifestations of male chauvinism is an important task, the overall thrust of the movement must go much deeper. It is in relation to this that we put forward the basic historical materialist approach developed by Marx and Engels. We point out how women have not always been oppressed since time immemorial, but that it was the advent of class society, based on the private ownership and inheritance of the means of production, that brought about their oppression. We refer to the period in pre-history known as the matriarchy, when women played the leading role in advancing human society, to demonstrate how the position of women is rooted in the economic and social conditions of society and not in the timeless psychology of man and woman.

We hold that only through the destruction of the existing economic and social structure, only through the destruction of capitalism and the building of a socialist society will women's liberation be realized.

This concept is questioned by many who note deep ingrained discriminatory attitudes and habits relating to women which permeate every aspect of our daily lives as a result of centuries of oppression. They challenge that it will take many more centuries to overcome this if it is **ever** overcome. Some point to the workers' states *(those states with planned, socialized economies at the time, such as Russia, China, the East European 'satellite' countries, excepting by and large Cuba –ed.)* where women have not achieved liberation and indeed anti-women legislation is actually being enforced.

We have a unique role to play in overcoming this profound skepticism through advancing our understanding of the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism that has encrusted itself on the first workers' states due to their primitive inheritance and their extended isolation. We should point to the new rise of the revolutionary tide which is ending this isolation and which constitutes an important factor in the developing political revolution within the workers' states themselves.

The destruction of the existing economic and social structure of capitalism is the necessary precondition for the liberation of women. Until this is accomplished all gains stand in constant jeopardy. Only then will it be possible to consciously intervene and act to strike at the very root causes of women's oppression.

This is not an academic matter but is a matter that involves the essential strategy of the movement. It determines that the strategy of the movement must be geared in an anti-capitalist direction. The demands we put forward are designed to give expression and direction to the inherently anti-capitalist dynamic of this struggle. They are transitional demands, which articulate women's needs, raise their consciousness and propel them forward in struggle against the system. One of the key tasks of revolutionaries in the liberation movement is to convince other women liberationists of the need for such a strategy and to participate with them in formulating it.

The need for such a strategy is little understood even by many women in the movement who claim to be Marxists who often advocate dead-end reformist projects or ultraleft actions which tend to isolate them from the mainstream of radicalizing women. For example: it is obvious that there is a pressing need for child care centres and abortion referral service and that the women's liberation movement must actively struggle for these, but it cannot be the responsibility of the women's liberation movement to provide these services themselves. This substitutionism proposed by many New Left women would only exhaust the as yet narrow resources of the movement and inhibit its ability to develop into a powerful social movement. Moreover it directs attention away from the real solution – that it is the responsibility of the state to provide these services under the democratic control of the users.

It is because the thrust of the women's liberation movement turns against the capitalist state, whose laws uphold the many facets of women's oppression, that the NDP is an immediate issue in the movement. The NDP has established itself as the voice for women's rights in the parliamentary arena. As a result women's liberation groups have been forced to relate to it, despite in some cases a deep-seated reluctance. In general, the task of establishing links with the

NDP has been greatly facilitated by the existence of the Waffle group, which has a sensitive program in this area, and which opens up the perspective of transforming the party into an instrument of considerable value in the struggle. A small, yet dynamic and firmly established NDP women's liberation group exists in Toronto with the dual aim of educating and winning the NDP to an effective program on women's liberation, and of seriously launching the struggle against male chauvinism within the NDP and the trade union movement.

This development tied to the ferment outside the NDP, will undoubtedly force the right wing to make some concessions and, where profitable to it, to demagogically associate itself with the movement. We must convince women liberationists to realize the necessity of political struggle, which the NDP represents on the broadest scale at this stage, to join with them in fighting the crass discrimination that permeates the labor movement, and above all to win them to the understanding that this movement represents a powerful force for the transformation of Canadian society and that they must orient towards it.

5) Are Only Working Class Women Oppressed?

On this question we again take issue with the ultraleftists who hold that the oppression of women is a sub-category of the exploitation of workers and that only working class women are oppressed. In this view the independent revolutionary dynamic of the women's liberation struggle is rejected and only struggles of women as workers are seen to be progressive.

Here we point out how the fact of woman's oppression permeates all layers of society. All women, regardless of their class, are relegated to particular sex roles, and are robbed of the ability to develop as creative and independent human beings. The basic issues on which the women's liberation movement is being built – such as abortion, discrimination at work and at school, the lack of child-care centres – relate to all women, and are drawing them, regardless of their class backgrounds, into struggle. To hold that only working class women are oppressed is also to fail to understand that women have been oppressed since the advent of class society, not just since the birth of capitalism and the creation of the modern proletariat. It is because the women's liberation movement is propelled forward by its own independent anti-capitalist dynamic, that it has the potential to become a powerful ally of the working class in the struggle for socialism.

At the same time it is important to recognize that one of the major challenges facing the women's liberation movement is to reach out to working women. Recent developments, such as the discussions on this issue at the recent CLC *(Canadian Labour Congress)* Convention, the struggles for paid maternity leave clauses to be included in contracts, and the formation of a women's liberation group in Oshawa by a number of NDP and UAW *(then the United Auto Workers)* women, indicate that the ferment on this issue is already being felt within the organized labor movement. The task before women liberationists is not to form separate trade unions for women, but to work within the existing labor movement. It has been primarily through struggle within these organizations that women workers have won whatever gains they now have. Women liberationists must work within the existing trade union movement to organize actions, formulate programs, and build women's caucuses with the aim of making these organizations meet their responsibilities to women. Their orientation must be to organize the vast majority of women workers who remain unorganized and to fight for demands that meet the particular needs of women.

6) The Debate around the Family

A further question that is heatedly debated in the movement centres around the family as an economic and social institution. A whole range of different views are put forward on this issue.

We put forward the historical materialist approach. We explain how the nuclear family emerged with class society as the mechanism whereby private property, the privately-owned means of production, was passed from one generation to the next. Class society throws the responsibility for caring for and raising children on the nuclear family, within which this becomes women's specific task and social function. The nuclear family bears the burden of taking care of the aged and infirm, and the education and inculcation of bourgeois values into children. Within its walls, backwardness, conservatism and a narrow selfishness are nurtured. Intolerable economic burdens, and, as a result, psychological pressures, are placed on this fundamental unit, which is then proclaimed sacred. As a result the family, as we know it today, far from tying individuals together on the basis of any real human relationships, chains them to one another on the basis of economic necessity. The family is a reactionary pillar of class society whose economic foundations must be destroyed in order to free its members from its shackles and to allow truly harmonious human relationships to flourish.

On this question we take sharp issue with the reformist position of the Communist Party and others who hold that the family as we know it today must be essentially preserved, that only its uglier features need be removed. We also firmly oppose the ultraleftist view that the task today is to build "communist alternatives" to the family, such as communes, day care centres and schools, where people, primarily women and children, can escape from the pressures and harshness of capitalist society.

It is in this context that we pose that it is the responsibility of society as a whole to care for and educate children; that we pose our demands for a far-reaching system of government-financed nurseries and child care centres. We pose the need for women to be financially independent – the demand for jobs for all women through sliding scales of hours; the demand for equal pay and for preferential hiring; the demand for a wage for homemakers.

The women's liberation movement and the LSA-LSO

Because of the rich revolutionary heritage that our movement embodies and applies to this particular struggle, our comrades are playing a key role in the women's liberation movement. The program and traditions of our movement, around which we are all educated, firmly uphold the full liberation of woman.

Our movement stands out in stark contrast to all other movements on the left. Women have played an important role as leaders and activists in our movement since long before the advent of the women's liberation movement. We date our heritage here back to the days of the early Canadian Communist Party, with its outstanding women leaders such as Florence Custance. Today our movement has more women in its leadership than ever before and is recruiting and developing the best of the radicalizing women.

And yet it is true that more than half our membership and leadership is male. This is not because we want things this way, nor because we are insensitive on this issue. Rather it is because we are building a movement with the people and in the conditions that exist in capitalist society. We are building an instrument to destroy capitalism not a microcosm of a future society.

We do not artificially inject women onto the leadership bodies of our movement nor do we artificially recruit women to our movement in order to redress this imbalance. To do so would be to undermine the type of movement and leadership we are building, and would be a callous manipulation of the women themselves. Unless the women (and men) we elect to the leadership of our movement are in fact the genuine leadership, they will be disregarded and the real leadership will operate outside the control of the movement and without being responsible to it.

It would be a disastrous misdirection of the energy and resources of our movement for us to turn inward and search out every vestige of male chauvinism in our midst. It is vitally important that we educate ourselves to overcome these prejudices,

but at the same time we must recognize that our movement is not something pure and apart from society, but it is part of the working class, the vanguard of the class, and is constantly receiving new forces from the class who bring with them the prejudices existing within the class.

Policy decisions regarding women's liberation work are the responsibility of the entire movement, not merely of its women comrades or its activists in the area. It is the movement in its totality, its tradition and program, the experience of all its cadres, not merely the day to day experiences of activists in a given area, which provides the long term direction of our work in this and any other area. Women's fractions are an important means of developing our work and our women leaders. We view it as a tactical question whether or not men participate in women's liberation fractions.

We are building a movement which will unite within its ranks the most conscious elements of all sections of the population and will weld them into a unified combat party. Within our ranks we must do all we can to combat alien class influences that create divisions and antagonisms. We are not a federation of oppressed groups, representing different and conflicting interests, but a democratic centralist movement in which all members participate in developing the program for and helping to lead a multi-faceted struggle for the abolition of capitalism.

We welcome the development of the women's liberation movement as a powerful indication of the deepening

radicalization that is taking place in Canada. This is a movement which has the potential to include half of the population and which is presently propelling a whole new layer of Canadian society into active struggle against capitalism. We are working in this movement with the utmost confidence and enthusiasm; we are activists and leaders in it; we are working to build it and direct it against the source of women's oppression – class society. At the same time we have seen the weaknesses of the movement, as it now is, without a Marxist perspective, by and large limited to utopian dreams, small-scale reforms, and sectarian blind alleys.

We work in the women's liberation movement convinced that our program is not only correct but indispensable to the future progress of the movement. It is the only foundation on which the movement can be built. It gives the correct perspective for the struggle, for involving the mass of Canadian women in struggle against the system around a series of transitional demands. It answers the question of who the women's liberation movement should look to as allies in its struggle – the revolutionary class, the workers. It ties this struggle to other struggles for liberation from capitalism. It holds that the complete overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a society free from exploitation and oppression – a socialist society – is necessary for the liberation of women. Without this analysis that we bring to the women's liberation movement it cannot achieve its aim.

The goal of this movement is not just women's liberation, but the liberation of all humanity from deep sexual, psychological, social and economic oppression. We must show that this requires nothing less than socialist revolution, that women liberationists must join in building the revolutionary party proven indispensable in leading this revolution. They must join the League for Socialist Action/Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière.

(end)